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# Recruitment of Chemistry Librarians

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## Recruitment of Chemistry Librarians, or "One Profession's Loss is Another Profession's Gain": Musings on the Darker Side of Recruitment

By Susanne J. Redalje, Head, Chemistry Library,  
University of Washington

While I can't honestly say people are breaking down my door demanding information on the wonders of a career in librarianship, I have been privileged over the years to discuss our profession with many would-be librarians. Many actually followed through and, as far as I know, are quite happy with their decision. I have served as a mentor to several students already in the Library School here at UW and written letters of reference for others, including one recently for a current student who, I think, will make an excellent librarian (though probably not in the area of chemistry).

I have enjoyed most of my career (though am not thrilled that a lot of it has been spent tearing down/canceling what my predecessors built, nor can I say I have enjoyed all the time I spent learning to kick the copier just right so it starts working again) and had some good input myself from professionals over the years, so I have tried to return the favor when I can. I have told them all the exciting things we do (and some of the less-than-exciting things; don't want to be sued for false advertising!) and the many traditional and not-so-traditional opportunities they may find. Until this fall, I hadn't really put much more thought into it than that.

While responding to an e-mail from a colleague, I excitedly told her I had just talked to another chemistry major who expressed interest in the field of chemical information. I had talked to the student for quite some time about what my life as an academic chemistry librarian is like. She was so interested I went a bit further than I usually do, showing her some of the literature available and the list of presentations from recent professional meetings. She seemed quite interested and headed off, planning to follow up on some of what we talked about, including Gary Wiggins' chemical informatics program at Indiana.

At the beginning of the message to my colleague I had been quite happy, so why was I so depressed by the end of the message? I had just talked to another student who loved chemistry but found life as a chemistry grad student untenable and was not thrilled with what she anticipated as her future if she continued down what had once seemed like an exciting and wonderful path.

As I noted earlier, students are not breaking down my door, but this was the third female chemistry

graduate student I had talked to over a fairly short period of time. Pondering the topic, I became a bit more depressed and tried to decide what, if anything, I should do about this phenomenon. The problem of women in the sciences is hardly a new one. I won't try to document here what we all already know. Many of you may well fit the pattern yourself. You started out with high hopes for a career of some sort in the field of chemistry, but along the way something happened.

Thanks to those of you who participated in my informal survey via CHMINF-L, I received a great deal of input and some fascinating stories. Those who responded, who represented many years of experience—from a student soon to graduate from library school to several with more than thirty years of experience—gave pretty much the same reasons for switching to librarianship that I heard from these students: They wanted to be able to have a life outside of the lab, including a family; they had to leave a program due to a spouse changing jobs; they did not feel welcome and/or were treated poorly by their advisers, department, etc. There were certainly variations on a theme, and some of these problems are also faced by men. Understandably, some people simply found they didn't like what they were doing as much as they had thought they would and wanted another option.

What had happened during the process of completing my e-mail message was that I had gone from excited to feeling somewhat guilty at somehow being more a part of the problem than a solution. So where am I going with this? At this point, I hope mostly to add another layer to our continuing important discussion on recruiting the next generation of chemistry librarians. Are we a part of the problem? I have many questions but few answers. How, for example, do we feel about adding people to our profession who are clearly choosing this one because they couldn't make it in another? Should we be having conversations with department chairs who may or may not be aware of how much trouble some of their students are having? Direct the students to whatever support systems might exist on campus? We are fortunate here on the UW campus to have several good support systems, including WiSE (Women in Science and Engineering), a university-level program designed to help recruit and maintain women in

science and engineering (<http://www.engr.washington.edu/wise/about.htm>). There are other programs as well. Clearly, not all students know about their options; nor, for that matter, do faculty.

As a member of the University of Washington Faculty Senate Special Committee on Faculty Women, I hear firsthand how much trouble women in academia still have. The current committee chair happens to be a chemical engineering professor who has been in these trenches for many years. When I expressed my concern, her recommendation was to keep up the good work. Her point? The women felt comfortable coming to me; they were the ones making the decisions about their careers, and it was a valid option to choose to have a life. She reminded me that many students, both male and female, simply choose not to play the game as it has been established. They do not want to spend 24/7 in the lab just to get tenure so they can continue working 24/7. Can't say that I blame them.

Librarianship has clearly benefited by the addition of highly talented and enthusiastic "science dropouts." I have no qualms about encouraging people to join a profession I think will be good for them, particularly when they will be good for us. Still, I wonder if there is a part we might play in improving the lot of women in the sciences?

To that end, I would like to encourage discussion of this topic on CHMINF-L and other appropriate locations. Am I the only one with questions? On one hand, to use a cliché, I say we take the money and run. We need these people to carry on and push the field into the future, and it is a very valid choice for anyone interested in chemistry. I would, however, prefer to live in a world where these women feel free to choose librarianship because they want to, not because they, for whatever reason, cannot follow their original goal.

There is a great deal of good literature out there on the recruitment of science librarians. One example is an overview in the spring 2003 issue of *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship*: "Leaving Science for LIS: Interviews and a Survey of Librarians with Scientific and Technical Degrees," by Julie Hallmark ([hallmark@ischool.utexas.edu](mailto:hallmark@ischool.utexas.edu)) and Mary Frances Lembo ([mf.lembo@pnl.gov](mailto:mf.lembo@pnl.gov)). The article can be found at <http://www.istl.org/03-spring/refereed1.html>. Another site of interest is <http://mail.sci.ccny.cuny.edu/~phibarn/careers.html>.

I plan to follow up my informal survey on CHMINF-L with a more formal survey to fill in information I did not ask in the first one, and will present the information when it is available.